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Working Profile: Vernon A. Walters An Envoy Who Specializes in Sensitive Missions

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WASHINGTON, June 2—Ambassador at Large Vernon A. Walters, the Army private who talked and worked his way up to three stars and then to the top level of the Central Intelligence Agency, is thriving now as the Administration's loner at large. Back in Government from the lucrative world of consulting on oil and arms, he roams the earth as Alexander M. Haig Jr.'s cat's-paw, portraying himself as an old soldier intent on a final run at peace and dismissing criticism that he is a consummate contract artist in pinstripes.

Fluent in seven foreign languages (French, Portuguese, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch and Russian) Mr. Walters surfaced in Havana in March for a four-hour conversation with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. He popped into Saddle River, N.J., in May for a private party with his old friends, Richard M. Nixon and King Hassan II of Morocco. And, in between, this retired general, Presidential translator, raconteur and natural gleaner of intelligence has logged untold leagues on State Department missions to El Salvador, Argentina and a dozen other troubled places.

One knowledgeable official says that Mr. Walters travels more than anyone else in the Administration, that he has spent perhaps half his days on the road, clocking more than 300,000 miles of air travel in behalf of Secretary of State Haig. Today, for example, African diplomats reported him conferring in Tanzania, with plans to move on to Zambia and Angola. Typically, the State Department would neither confirm nor deny the reports.

Part of the 'Haig Junta'

In joining the Reagan team as an early member of what is lightly termed the "Haig junta," Mr. Walters moved fast at the State Department in securing a prized suite and his own photocopying machine and in quickly having fetched from overseas duty the military man he preferred as an aide.

"That sort of clout impresses the bureaucracy where they live," said a State Department veteran. "Then he flies off on his missions, building the old mystique."

Though most of the Ambassador's travels go unannounced, there are a few Walters-watchers who squint suspiciously at the occasional mentions of his coming or going in foreign news dispatches. They recall his missions in the Nixon Administration when he would drop from sight and deal secretly with China and North Vietnam on sensitive matters.

Mr. Walters believes his credibility as an emissary is rooted in the social contacts he has built with powerful figures around the world in four decades of work in the public and private sectors. Critics wonder whether he can easily put aside his private endeavors. After leaving Government in 1976, Mr. Walters became a consultant and included among his clients an American company interested in the arms market in Morocco, where Mr. Walters has many friends from his World War II days. He also worked for an international oil cartel scouting the fields of Guatemala where he also has friends in government.

'Not Running a Shuttle'

To the critics, Mr. Walters replies: "If I was a bad man, I couldn't keep doing this."

The son of an insurance executive, Mr. Walters was born in New York and received a continental education that was cut short of a college degree by the war. He rose rapidly in the Army, gaining a reputation as a smart aide-de-camp who befriended foreign generals and diplomats.

With his quiet style and de-emphasis of the human rights issue he brings to his ambassadorial post, Mr. Walters has won praise from such influential critics of past policies as John Carbaugh, the conservative foreign affairs specialist on the staff of Senator Jesse A. Helms, Republican of

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Associated Press



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North Carolina.

"Dick Walters is not out there running a shuttle with his face in the newspapers," said Mr. Carbaugh. "He knows more world leaders than anyone else except our ex-Presidents, and he not only speaks to them in their own language, but their own dialects."

But Lawrence Birns of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a private study group, rates Mr. Walters as an "absurd" diplomat, a "Jack-in-the-box" envoy who has "aggressively courted" Latin-American dictatorships and set back American interests. "My only comfort is that he is not a grand strategist, merely a utility ballplayer," said Mr. Birns, who feels the \$300,000 Mr. Walters made as an international arms consultant before returning to Government compromises diplomatic professionalism:

In dozens of recent world missions, Mr. Walters has hurried six times to Argentina alone, most recently taking on the thankless task of telling his friends in the junta that, with war beginning in the Falklands, Washington had to side with Britain. Mr. Walters offers no complaints, even though he spent considerable time lobbying the hemisphere for Mr. Reagan on the dangers of Soviet-Cuban colonialism.

Asked for a precise itinerary of his recent travels, which in itself would be a revealing map of the Administration's private priorities, the husky, 6-foot-3-inch bachelor laughed non-committally, as if he were being asked about the Maltese Falcon. Not surprising from the man who, as a military attaché in Paris in the Nixon Administration, is remembered for concocting cover stories of secret trysts in order to "smuggle" Henry Kissinger into France 15 times for secret meetings with the North Vietnamese.

"I can stand in an airport terminal and nobody notices me," the 65-year-old Ambassador said proudly of his

method of traveling light, often on commercial aircraft under his own name.

In contrast to this anonymous blur is Mr. Walters behavior when he is out of power, usually during a Democratic administration. He churns out books crammed with anecdotes about his travels with Presidents and kings. He was with Truman for the famous confrontation with MacArthur; with Eisenhower when the U-2 spy plane went down, with Vice President Nixon for what the two now annually commemorate as their "rock 'n' roll day," May 13, 1958, when a Venezuelan mob stoned their car.

Role in Watergate

As the C.I.A. deputy favored by Mr. Nixon, Mr. Walters carried out a White House mission to caution the Federal Bureau of Investigation that the Watergate investigation could compromise overseas intelligence operations. He emerged unscathed, however, when, as he testified later, he soon discovered there was no such impediment and he threatened to resign if further abuses of the C.I.A. were attempted.

"His style is genuinely impressive," said one White House veteran who recalled a terrible moment on President Nixon's 1968 visit to Germany. At the end of a 10-minute toast in German the official translator suddenly became incapacitated. Mr. Walters, there as an observer, stepped in and delivered a 10-minute translation that the Germans pronounced perfect.

Said William E. Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence: "Dick could make contact with a missing Eskimo and learn the language going in on the plane."

The closest Walters-watchers outside Government are suspicious that the Ambassador is working on some dramatic move for Mr. Reagan, a public relations coup or, detractors joke, maybe even a real one.

"I am no longer in the intelligence business," the Ambassador emphasizes these days. But he does note, teasingly that, at best, only one out of every four of his trips is known outside the department.

"This is not being secret," Mr. Walters said. "It's being discreet."